

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Safeguarding the People of Nagorno-Karabakh

June 21, 2023 – 2:00 p.m.
2360 Rayburn House Office building

Statement of John Evans
Former US Ambassador to Armenia

As U.S. Ambassador to Yerevan, I learned a few things about the history of the Armenians, including those who live in Nagorno-Karabakh, or, as they prefer to call the region, “Artsakh.” Later, as a private citizen, I visited Artsakh.ⁱ

- One of the earliest histories recounts that, after losing an important battle to the Persians in 451 A.D., the “Armenians fled into the forests of Artsakh.”
- A German visitor to the Caucasus in the 1840s reported that “the Armenians are most numerous in the province of Karabakh, after Armenia proper.”ⁱⁱ
- And it was not for no reason that the Commissariat for Nationalities made Nagorno-Karabakh as an autonomous region within Soviet Azerbaijan.ⁱⁱⁱ

In short, the Armenians have been in Karabakh for centuries. They are indigenous to the region.

Virtually all of the conflicts, “frozen” and otherwise, in the former Soviet Union have been to some extent the product of the disintegration of that great (in the sense of large), empire. As the Communist Party lost power and the USSR collapsed, unresolved conflicts and competing agendas emerged. The Party’s monopoly on power gave way to the formation of national republics along the lines of the former internal administrative borders of the USSR. The “titular” nationalities took over, and, in many cases, smaller national groups were put at risk. **The process of disintegration continues to this day.**

The Armenian case is special in its own way. The Armenians and other Christians were subjected to a genocide just over a hundred years ago, in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire. In that case, the old unifying principle (loyalty to the Sultan) was giving way to a rising Turkish nationalism. There was apparently no place for the Armenians in the new Turkish state that was emerging; they were perceived as an obstacle to Turkish unity, along with the Greeks and the Kurds. I am skipping lightly over a great deal of complexity and nuance here,^{iv} but my main point is that when we look at the situation of the Armenians living in Karabakh, contained within a Turkic state, we have to consider **the very real danger of another genocide.** This is

not only in view of the historical precedent, but because of statements made and actions taken by the current authorities of Azerbaijan, and, indeed, by politicians of its closest ally, Turkey.

We Americans and the Europeans have attempted, through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, with which this Commission is familiar, to mitigate and manage the conflicts that have erupted in the former Soviet Union. Some interventions have proven effective, others not. In several cases, there has been serious violence, the most recent being, of course, Ukraine. But the first such outbreak was the First Karabakh War, which ended with an Armenian victory and a precarious cease-fire in 1994. Efforts to resolve the two sides' differences through the OSCE Minsk Group mediation process, in which France Russia and the United States closely cooperated, eventually failed and, in the Second Karabakh war in 2020, Azerbaijan soundly defeated Armenia. The subsequent period has been one in which Baku has bullied Armenia, invaded her territory, and pressured the people of Karabakh with the clear purpose of driving them out.

It is ultimately for the Armenians of Karabakh and the Azeri authorities to decide how they are going to live together as neighbors in the future. That is not our task today. **Today's challenge is to preserve the lives of the Karabakh Armenians in the face of a potentially genocidal threat.** Given that the Minsk Group process has broken down, other approaches are now called for.

- It would be more than justified for the United States to lift its waiver of Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act, which prohibits the sale of military equipment to Azerbaijan.
- It would be well to put the brakes on Turkish and Israeli arms sales to Baku.
- And it may be more urgent than ever to engage the Azerbaijani government in a serious discussion, at the highest levels, of the way ahead, emphasizing that “ethnic cleansing” of the Armenians of Karabakh is not acceptable.

ⁱ I traveled to Artsakh in 2016, after the four-day war, as an advisor to the Children of Armenia Fund.

ⁱⁱ Von Haxthausen, Baron August. *Transcaucasia and the Tribes of The Caucasus* (London: Gomidas, 2016)

ⁱⁱⁱ The Central Committee of the Communist Party reversed an earlier decision of the Commissariat in 1921, and Karabakh officially became an autonomous *oblast* of Azerbaijan in 1923.

^{iv} For a more detailed treatment of the genocide issue, see my book, *Truth Held Hostage: America and the Armenian Genocide – What Then? What Now?* (London: Gomidas, 2016).